Underground Railroad in Livingston County

By

Dale C. Maley

Livingston County Historical Society

Last Updated: February 26, 2026

Underground Railroad Definitions

- A network of secret routes and safe houses established in the United States during the early to mid-19th century.

- Enslaved African Americans used it primarily to escape into free states and from there to Canada.

- Mainly the work of free African Americans, was assisted by abolitionists and others sympathetic to the cause of the escapees.

- The enslaved people who risked capture and those who aided them are also collectively referred to as the passengers and conductors of the "Underground Railroad."

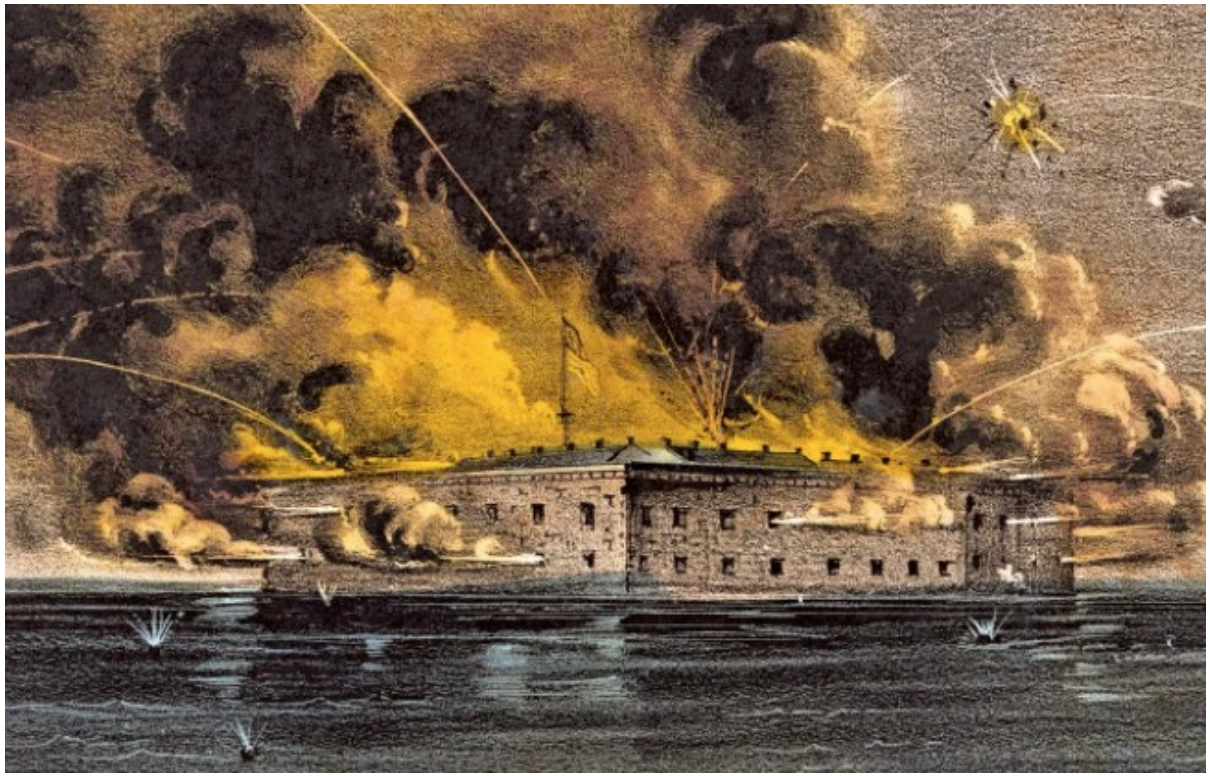
How Many Slaves in the South Prior to the Civil War?

4 Million

- The 1860 census recorded 3,953,760 enslaved people in the United States, which is considered the final count of slaves before the Civil War.

When did the Civil War Start?

•On April 12, 1861 – Confederate forces fired upon Fort Sumter, South Carolina



Underground Railroad in Livingston County

- The Underground Railroad began in about 1840.

- It ran north and grew steadily until President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863.

- The proclamation declared "that all persons held as slaves" within the rebellious states "are, and henceforward shall be free."

- One estimate suggests that, by 1850, approximately 100,000 enslaved people had escaped to freedom via the network.

100K/4 Million = 2.5% Escaped

Underground Railroad in Livingston County

THE

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

FROM

SLAVERY TO FREEDOM

BY

WILBUR H. SIEBERT

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF EUROPEAN HISTORY
IN OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

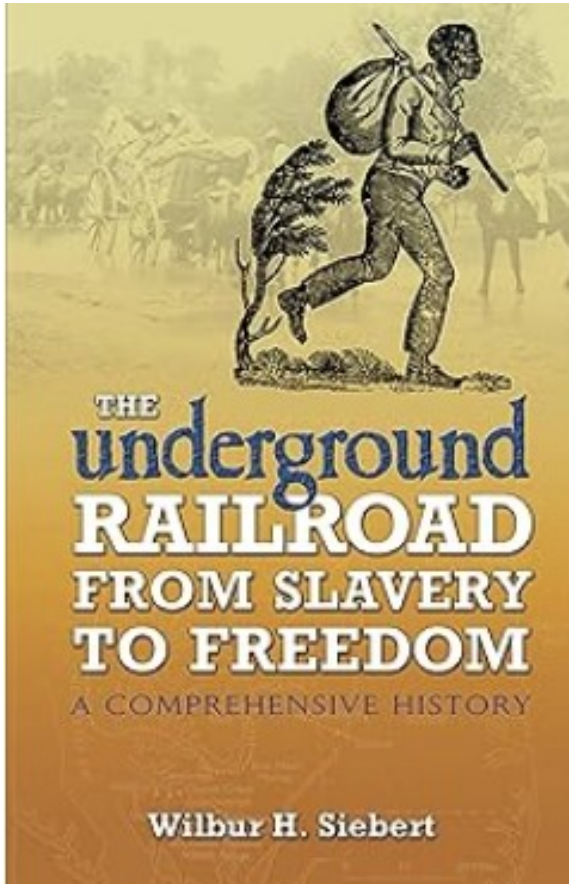
BY

ALBERT BUSHNELL HART

PROFESSOR OF HISTORY IN HARVARD UNIVERSITY

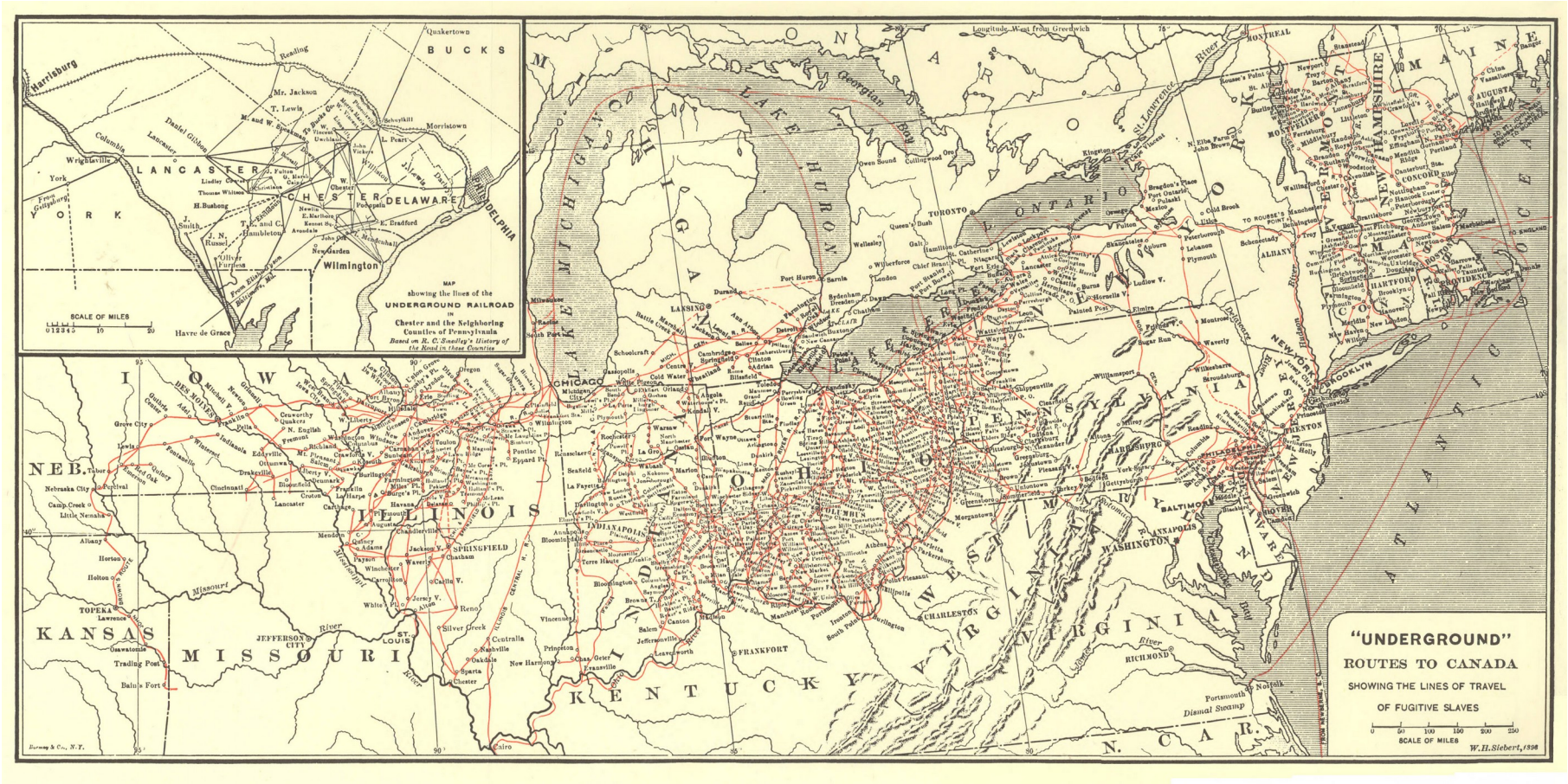
New York
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
LONDON: MACMILLAN & CO., LTD.
1898

All rights reserved

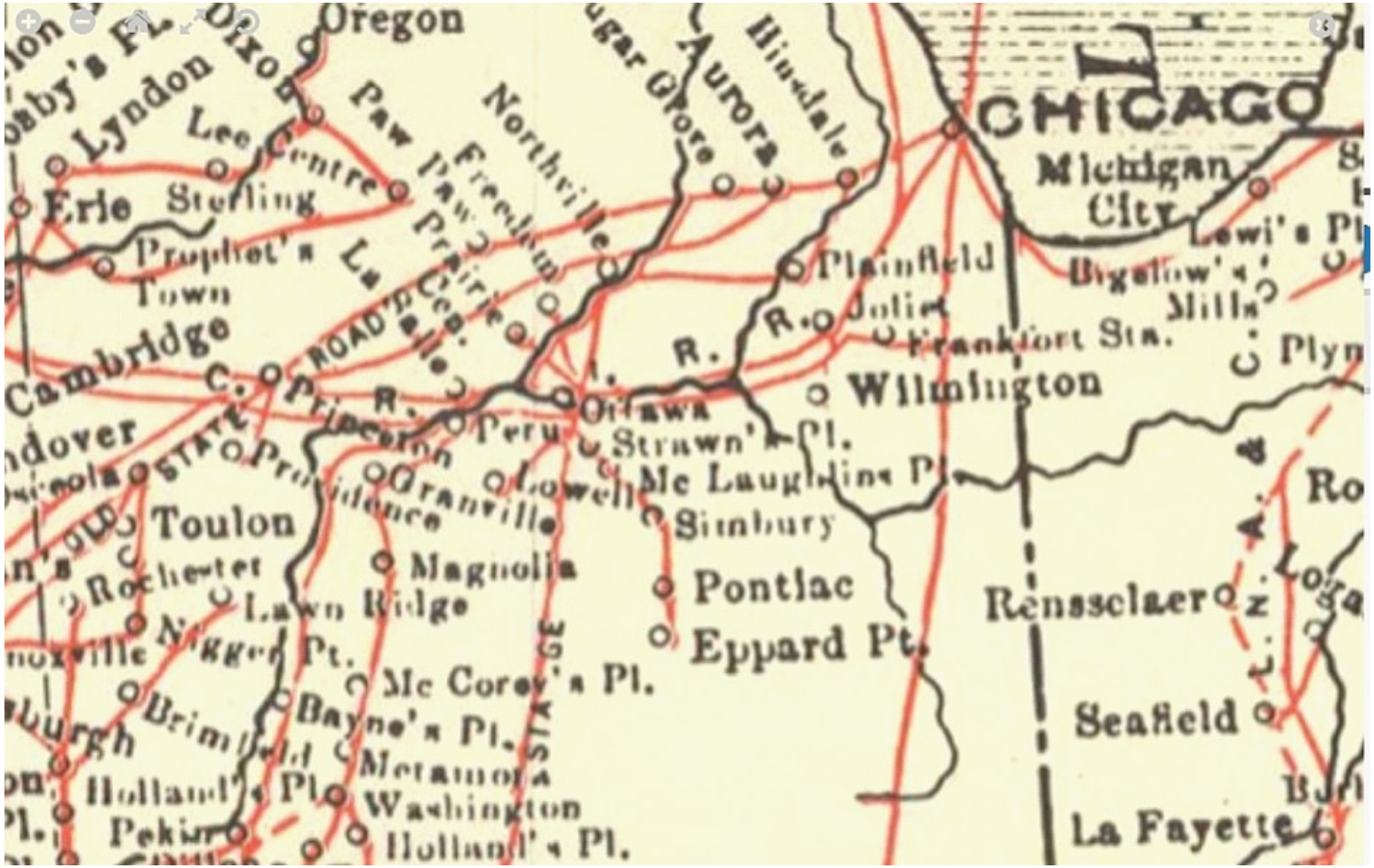


- Best book on Underground RR
- Written in 1898, PDF or buy new

Underground Railroad in Livingston County


"UNDERGROUND"
ROUTES TO CANADA
SHOWING THE LINES OF TRAVEL
OF FUGITIVE SLAVES
SCALE OF MILES
W.H.Siebert,1898
MAP
showing the lines of the
UNDERGROUND RAILROAD
IN
Chester and the Neighboring
Counties of Pennsylvania
Based on R. C. Smedley's History of
the Road in these Counties
SCALE OF MILES
Harrisburg
Reading
Quakertown
BUCKS
Mr. Jackson
T. Lewis
Morristown
LANCASTER
CHESTER
DELAWARE
PHILADELPHIA
Wilmington
Havre de Grace
YORK
Wrightsville
Columbia
Lancaster
New Garden
Kennett Sq.
Avondale
Pocopson
Unionville
Longitude West from Greenwich
MICHIGAN
LAKE HURON
Georgian Bay
Owen Sound
Collingwood
TORONTO
Hamilton
Niagara
Port Stanley
Port Burwell
Port Huron
Sarnia
London
Chatham
Detroit
Windsor
Milwaukee
Racine
Kenosha
Waukegan
CHICAGO
Michigan City
South Bend
Elkhart
Goshen
Plymouth
Logansport
Peru
Kokomo
Marion
Muncie
Richmond
Connersville
Cincinnati
Lawrenceburg
Aurora
Madison
Vevay
Rising Sun
Evansville
Mount Vernon
Princeton
Vincennes
Terre Haute
Indianapolis
Greensburg
Shelbyville
Columbus
Zanesville
Cambridge
Wheeling
Parkersburg
Charleston
Huntington
Ashland
Portsmouth
Maysville
Covington
Newport
Cleveland
Akron
Canton
Massillon
Mansfield
Sandusky
Toledo
Fremont
Bellevue
Norwalk
Tiffin
Findlay
Bucyrus
Delaware
Marion
Springfield
Dayton
Xenia
Hillsboro
Chillicothe
Portsmouth
Ironton
Gallipolis
Pomeroy
Athens
Marietta
Parkersburg
Wheeling
Steubenville
Wellsville
Salem
Alliance
Ravenna
Warren
Youngstown
New Castle
Beaver
Pittsburgh
Washington
Uniontown
Connellsville
Somerset
Johnstown
Altoona
Bedford
Cumberland
Hagerstown
Frederick
Gettysburg
York
Lancaster
Reading
Pottsville
Shamokin
Sunbury
Lewisburg
Williamsport
Lock Haven
Clearfield
Punxsutawney
Kittanning
Butler
Meadville
Erie
Corry
Titusville
Oil City
Franklin
Warren
Jamestown
Dunkirk
Buffalo
Niagara Falls
Lockport
Rochester
Batavia
Geneva
Auburn
Syracuse
Oswego
Utica
Rome
Oneida
Cooperstown
Albany
Troy
Schenectady
Saratoga
Glens Falls
Whitehall
Ticonderoga
Plattsburgh
Rouse's Point
Montreal
St. Lawrence River
Ogdensburg
Potsdam
Canton
Malone
Saranac Lake
Lake Champlain
Burlington
Rutland
Bennington
Brattleboro
Keene
Concord
Manchester
Nashua
Portsmouth
Dover
Portland
Augusta
Bangor
Calais
St. Andrews
St. John
Fredericton
Woodstock
Houlton
Presque Isle
Caribou
Fort Kent
Edmundston
Grand Falls
Campbellton
Dalhousie
Bathurst
Chatham
Newcastle
Moncton
Sackville
Amherst
Truro
Halifax
Yarmouth
Digby
Annapolis
Kentville
Windsor
Liverpool
Bridgewater
Lunenburg
Shelburne
Barrington
Pubnico
Weymouth
Digby
Saint

Underground Railroad in Livingston County



- Did not research 2 routes to east and west of Pontiac

Sources to Search for more info on the Pontiac Route

- 1898 Professor Siebert's book has map of route from Weston to Ottawa
- 1878 Livingston County History book
- 1879 McLean County history book
- 1908 Ford County history book – no info on eastern route
- 1977 Stuffed Clubs & Antimacassars by Alma Lewis James, Fairbury Historian
- Sentinel & Daily Leader (some articles)
- Pantagraph (no articles before 1865 on Liv. County)

Underground Railroad in Livingston County

- Most of the Underground Railroad routes in Illinois were in the western half of Illinois and followed the Mississippi River.

- There was only one major route in east-central Illinois, many miles east of Livingston County.

Underground Railroad in Livingston County

- The first settler family in Livingston County was Valentine Darnall in 1830 south of Fairbury

- Livingston County was not formed until 1837. Livingston County was one of the last counties in Illinois to be settled.

- The land was swampy, and no railroads existed to ship agricultural supplies or products.

- In 1850, Congress passed a new Script Act law, which gave free land to primarily veterans of the War of 1812.

- This new law created a rush of settlers into Livingston County between 1853 and 1860. By 1860, all the farmland in the county was claimed by settlers.

Underground Railroad in Livingston County

•Because there were almost no farmers living in Livingston County between 1830 and 1853, it is not surprising there were no major Underground Railroad routes in the county.

•Alma Lewis James was a Fairbury Historian who wrote the book ***Stuffed Clubs & Antimaccassars***.

Alma Lewis James

•In her book, she claimed there was an underground railroad route from Strawn to Odell.

•The path included a stop-over at a cabin on the Fugate farm northeast of Fairbury on the Vermilion River.

Underground Railroad in Livingston County

- Alma reported there was one enslaved person known to be buried by the river bank.

- She said no other information about this route was available because all the activities were secret and done at night.

- Unfortunately, Alma cited no reference material sources for her story.

- A Fugate descendant said that as a young boy, relatives would point out about where the cabin and burial was thought to be.

Underground Railroad in Livingston County

An integrated sack race on East Main Street for both participants and spectators. At one time, about 100 blacks lived in and near Fairbury. They attended the same schools as whites but went to different Methodist and Baptist churches and Sunday schools. Most came from Mike Sullivant's farm in Fayette Township. Fairbury's best-known black was Richard "Side Hill Dick" Quarles, who became the first Negro to vote in Fairbury, in an 1870 township election. His voting was witnessed by a large crowd in a circus atmosphere. Fairbury's blacks staged Possum Suppers and concerts to raise money for their churches. There was also a Colored Brass Band. Fairbury had a station on the Underground Railway to help free slaves. It was a little cabin in the woods near the river. The Railway portion which concerned Fairbury ran between Strawn and Odell.

Fairbury Blade newspaper

Integrated potato sack race.

Larger print

Underground Railroad in Livingston County

An integrated sack race on East Main Street for both participants and spectators. At one time, about 100 blacks lived in and near Fairbury. They attended the same schools as whites but went to different Methodist and Baptist churches and Sunday schools. Most came from Mike Sullivant's farm in Fayette Township. Fairbury's best-known black was Richard "Side Hill Dick" Quarles, who became the first Negro to vote in Fairbury, in an 1870 township election. His voting was witnessed by a large crowd in a circus atmosphere. Fairbury's blacks staged Possum Suppers and concerts to raise money for their churches. There was also a Colored Brass Band. Fairbury had a station on the Underground Railway to help free slaves. It was a little cabin in the woods near the river. The Railway portion which concerned Fairbury ran between Strawn and Odell.

- No evidence could be found to document the Strawn to Odell route.
- There is an Odell history pamphlet/book which has photo of Odell house which was used on the Underground Railroad
- Pontiac Daily Leader article on the Odell house =>

Underground Railroad in Livingston County

Odell House

- Pontiac Daily Leader
- March 27, 1976

The three-story, twenty-two room home built by Capt. William Strawn in 1862 overlooked Odell and the surrounding countryside from its location on a high piece of ground outside the village limits. The Strawn home was torn down in 1952. The small partitioned rooms in the basement had been used by the Underground Railroad, the escape route for black slaves during the Civil War.

The Fugitive Slave Act

- Passed on September 18, 1850 by Congress.

- The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was part of the Compromise of 1850.

- The act required that slaves be returned to their owners, even if they were in a free state.

- The act also made the federal government responsible for finding, returning, and trying escaped slaves.

- A slave found in Livingston County, legally was supposed to be returned to his/her master in the South.

Underground Railroad in Livingston County

James Stout - Fiery Abolitionist (1878 History Book)

- Lived in Livingston County from 1855 to 1870 - "sassy Jim Stout"
- Taught school in Kentucky, focused on teaching freedom to enslaved people
- Fled north after blood-hounds pursued him across the Ohio River

- At Ottawa court hearing for fugitive slave, jumped on table and shouted "I move we form ourselves into a committee to carry this poor slave back to slavery!“

- Room erupted in chaos - slave spirited out window into carriage bound for Canada

James Stout - Fiery Abolitionist (1878 History Book)

- Arrested and tried for helping fugitive escape - defended himself in court

- When asked about his intent, demanded “Issue a subpoena for God Almighty! He is the only one who knows my intent“
  (Judge said he did not want to subpoena God)

- Acquitted while others convicted and fined

- Later became editor/proprietor of Pontiac Sentinel newspaper

- Appointed Receiver of Public Moneys in Boise City, Idaho by President Grant in 1869

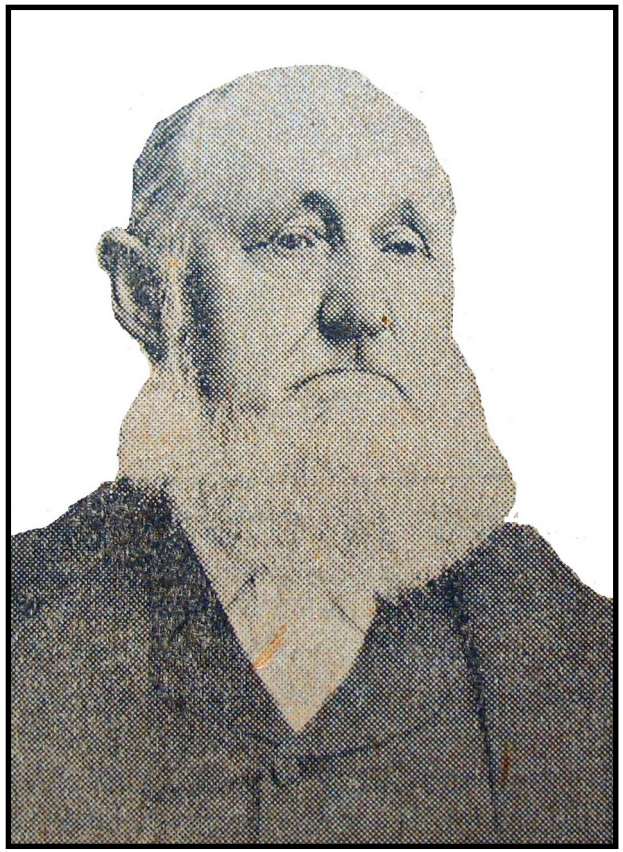
Underground Railroad in Livingston County

- Dr. C. B. Ostrander was one of the first doctors in Livingston County.

- He lived between Fairbury and McDowell.

- The 1888 Livingston County history book recounts that Dr. Ostrander was also a staunch Abolitionist.

- One day, he came into Fairbury and found a fugitive slave chained to the floor of a two-story building.



Underground Railroad in Livingston County

- This fugitive slave was going to be returned to his master in Virginia.

- The Doctor cut the shackles from the fugitive using a crowbar, sledgehammer, and chisel.

- He loaded the fugitive into a horse-drawn buggy and delivered him to Dr. C. V. Dyer in Chicago.

- Ostrander also gave the fugitive $10 in cash.
  ($10 in 1850 = $372 in today's dollars)

- The fugitive was placed on Captain Blake's steamer "Illinois." The steamer transported him to freedom in Maiden, Canada.

Underground Railroad in Livingston County

- The 1878 Livingston County history book contains a lot of information about several men in Pontiac who were strong Abolitionists and participated in the Underground Railroad route that ran from Eppards Point Township west of Fairbury to Pontiac and then on to Ottawa.

Underground Railroad in Livingston County

- **These 14 men included:**
  - -Owen Lovejoy
  - -James H. Collins
  - -Ichabod Codling
  - -Chauncey Cook
  - -Otis Richardson
  - -John Hossack
  - -William B. Fyfe
  - -William Strawn
  - -Otis Whaley
  - -George and Xenophon Richards
  - -Moses Rumery
  - -C. P. Pagent
  - -Dr. H. H. Hinman.

Descendants still living in Livingston County?

Doctors, Lawyers, Judges, Businessmen

Underground Railroad in Livingston County

- One of the Abolitionist leaders in the Pontiac area was **William B. Fyfe** (1822-1910).

- He was born and raised in Scotland.

- He came to Canada in 1844 and worked in the mercantile business.

- In 1849, he moved to Ottawa, Illinois.

- While in Ottawa, he was a Conductor and operated a safe house "Depot" for the Underground Railroad.

- Mr. Fyfe became a lawyer.

Underground Railroad in Livingston County

- In 1856, Mr. Fyfe moved to Livingston County and set up a store in New Michigan for two years.

- New Michigan was north of Pontiac.

- The new railroads did not go through New Michigan, so it became a Ghost Town.

- Mr. Fyfe became a farmer.

- In 1862, he moved to Pontiac and entered the law firm of E. A. Harding.

- That same year, he enlisted in the Union Army and fought in the Civil War.

Underground Railroad in Livingston County

- Mr. Fyfe's experience as a conductor and depot operator in Ottawa likely led to the formation of an underground railroad line originating west of Fairbury at the Otis Richardson Farm.

- The line ran north to Pontiac and then to Ottawa in LaSalle County.

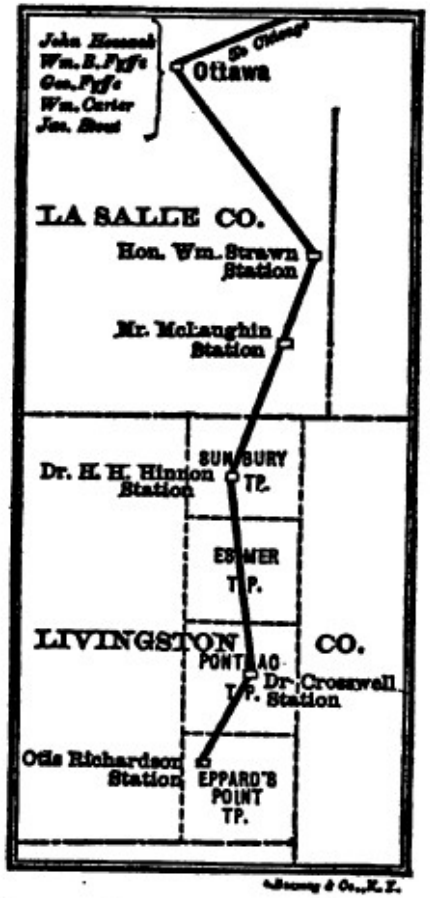
Underground Railroad in Livingston County

- For his 1898 book on the Underground Railroad, Professor Siebert obtained a hand-drawn map of the stretch of the Underground Railroad from west of Fairbury up to Ottawa from William B. Fyfe.

- Mr. Fyfe died in 1910, so he likely provided the map to Professor Siebert for his 1898 book.

Underground Railroad in Livingston County

From a drawing made by Mr. W. B. Fyffe, an old-time station-agent of Ottawa, Illinois, the accompanying chart of a line of escape through Livingston and La Salle counties in Illinois is reproduced. The portion of the trail represented is about forty miles in length, and is remarkable for the directness of its course and the absence of interlacing lines. At Ottawa, the northernmost station shown, the trail loses these two characteristics, for it makes there a sharp turn on its way to the terminus, Chicago, and at Ottawa also it makes a junction with several other lines from the western part of the state.[1]



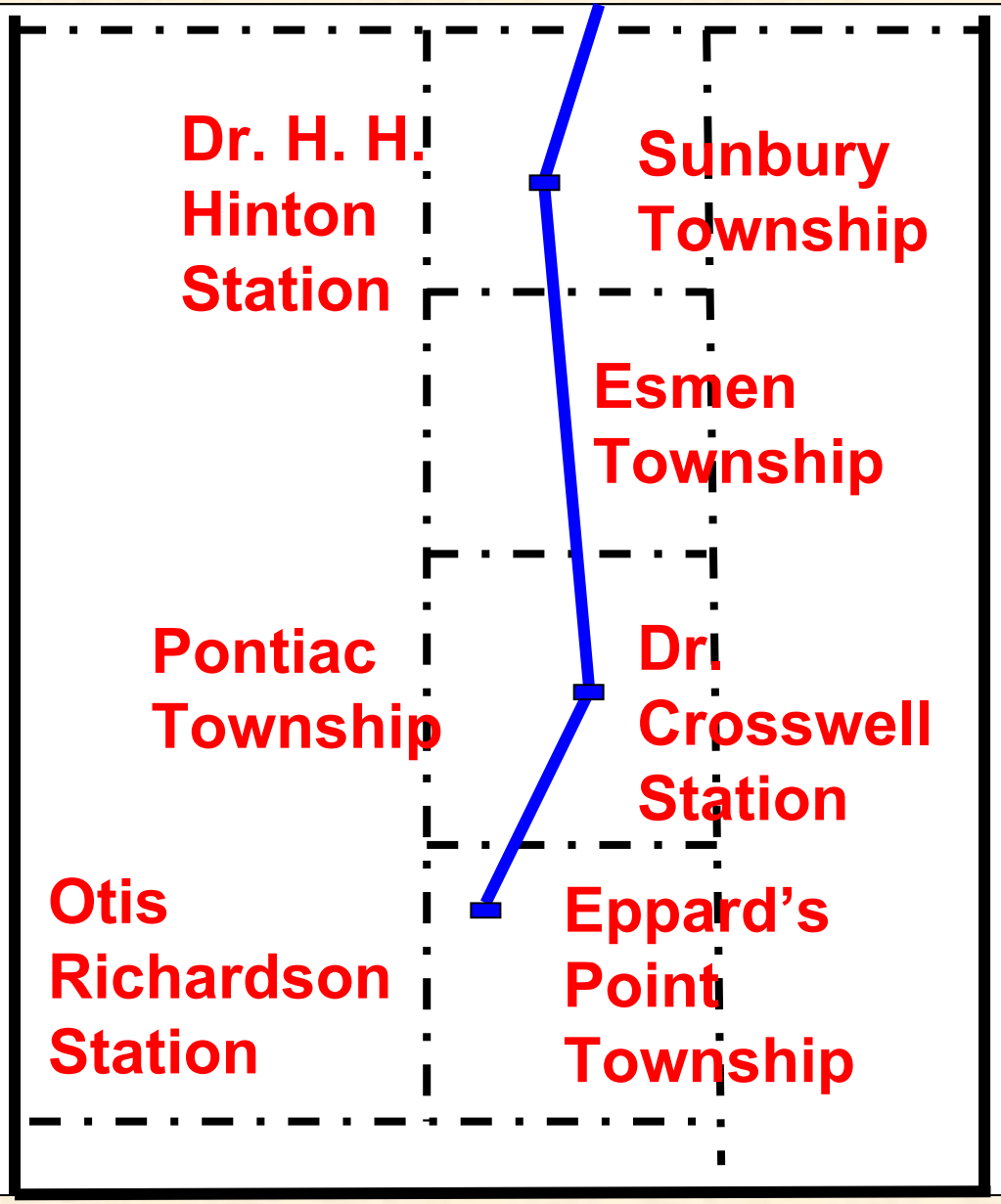
SIMPLE ROUTE THROUGH LIVINGSTON AND LA SALLE COUNTIES, ILLINOIS.

Drawn by William B. Fyffe.

From Professor Siebert's book

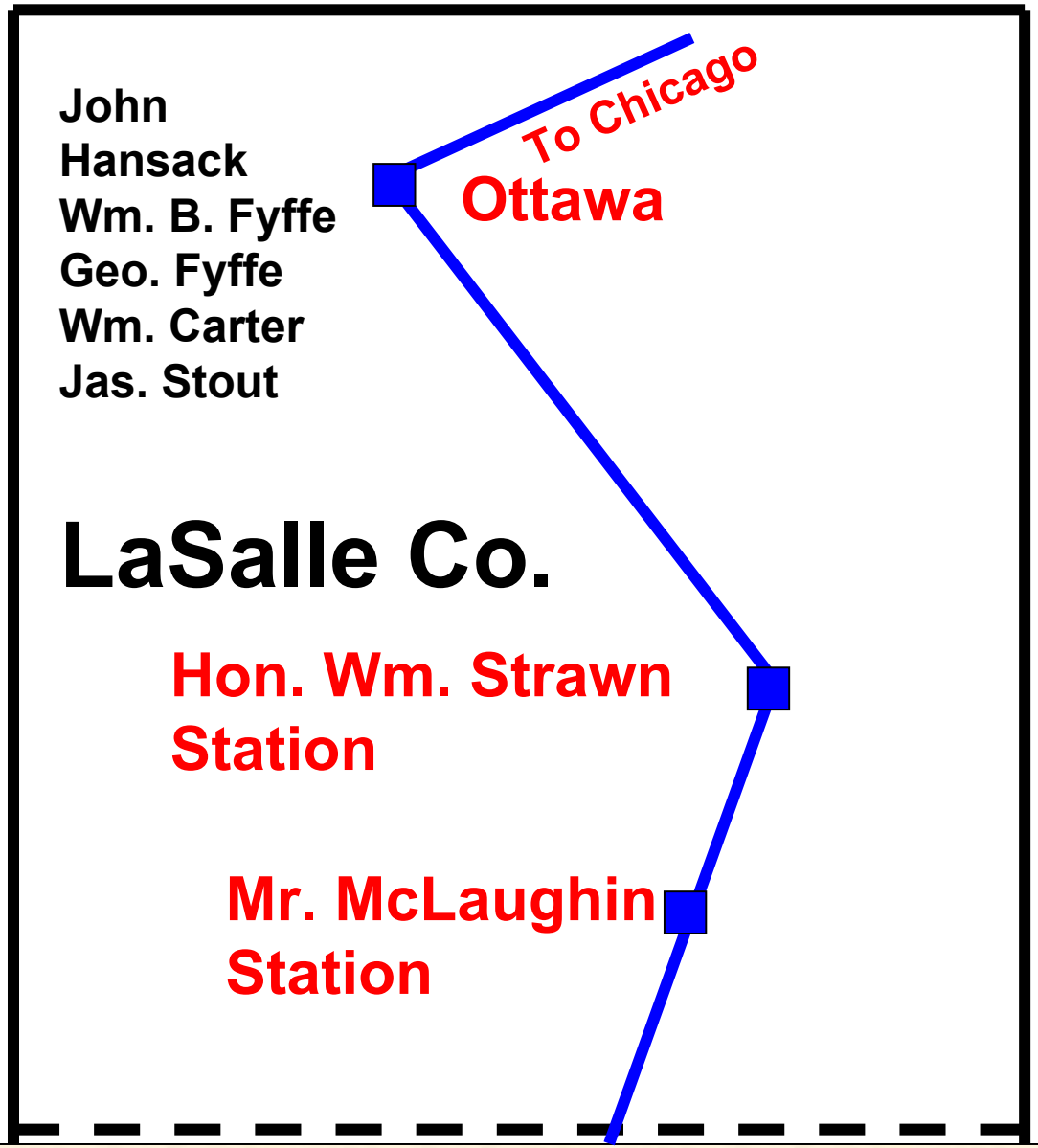
Map only

Underground Railroad in Livingston County



Livingston County

Underground Railroad in Livingston County



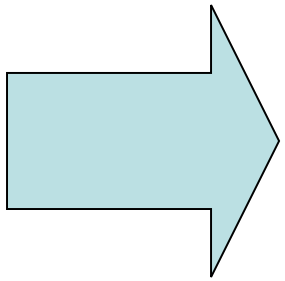
Underground Railroad in Livingston County

- Unfortunately, Mr. Fyfe's map extends only as far south as Otis Richardson's farm.

- Exact location of Richardson's farm is unknown, he did not buy land from Federal Government

- South of Otis Richardson's farm would mark the end of Livingston County and the start of McLean County.

Check McLean County History Book



Underground Railroad in Livingston County

- The 1879 McLean County history book references the Underground Railroad having a station in Mount Hope Township.

- This township is southwest of Bloomington.

- Mr. John Moss had a secret compartment in his house for hiding slave fugitives.

Underground Railroad in Livingston County

•Mr. Moss or one of his friends would guide the fugitives to one of two destinations.

1. Poor Weather

•The first destination was Aunt Polly's Mahan's station at Lexington.

2. Good Weather

•If the weather was excellent, the more extended alternative destination was the Abolitionists in New Michigan, operated by Charles Pagent and his supporters in Livingston County.

Emancipation Proclamation

- The Emancipation Proclamation was an executive order issued by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863 that declared enslaved people in rebellious states to be free.

- It was a key step towards abolishing slavery, but it didn't abolish slavery permanently

Underground Railroad in Livingston County

- Because of the Emancipation Proclamation, The Underground Railroad ceased operations around 1863

- This work continued above ground as part of the Union's efforts against the Confederacy

13th Amendment

The 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution provides that "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

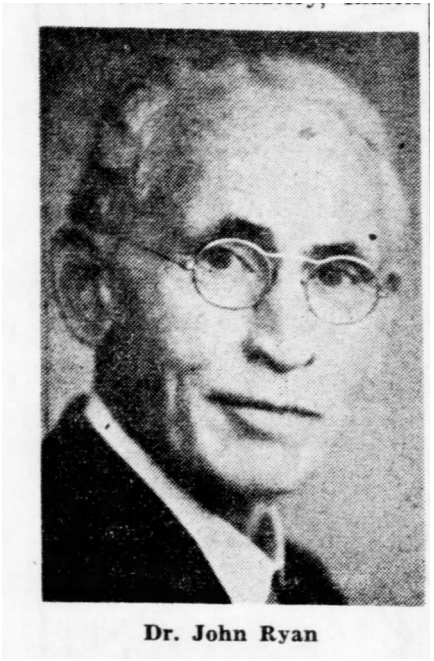
13th Amendment Timeline

April 8, 1864: The Senate passed the 13th Amendment
January 31, 1865: The House of Representatives passed the 13th Amendment with a vote of 119–56 [Lincoln Lobbied For]
February 1, 1865: President Abraham Lincoln approved the joint resolution of Congress that submitted the 13th Amendment to the states for ratification
April 9, 1865: General Lee surrendered to General Grant
April 15, 1865. President Lincoln assassinated.
December 6, 1865: The required 27 of the then 36 states ratified the 13th Amendment
December 18, 1865: The 13th Amendment was proclaimed

About a 20 month process

Underground Railroad in Livingston County

- Dr. John Ryan (1860-1948)
- Minister – Chaplain of Boy's Reformatory in Pontiac


Dr. John Ryan

- President of Livingston County Historical Society
- Did research on Underground Railroad for Illinois State Historical Society in 1913
- Gave many talks on Underground Railroad
  -gave talks to Lexington students (Aunt Polly's House ??)
  (have not found any of his research) ==========➔

Perplexity AI

Yes. Dr. John Ryan of Pontiac, Illinois, did publish on the Underground Railroad with the Illinois State Historical Society in that era. books.google

In the 1913 volume of the *Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society* there is an article on the Underground Railroad in Illinois by John Ryan, which discusses routes, local "stations," and antislavery activity in the state. books.google

As of Feb. 26, 2026, I can not access to get a copy of his article.

Dr. John Ryan

Closing Thoughts

- The issue of whether or not to return fugitive enslaved people to their owners in the South in the 1840 to 1863 era did have an impact on Fairbury and Livingston County citizens.

- A branch of the Underground Railroad running from west of Fairbury and through Pontiac on to Ottawa did help many fugitive enslaved people obtain their freedom in Canada.

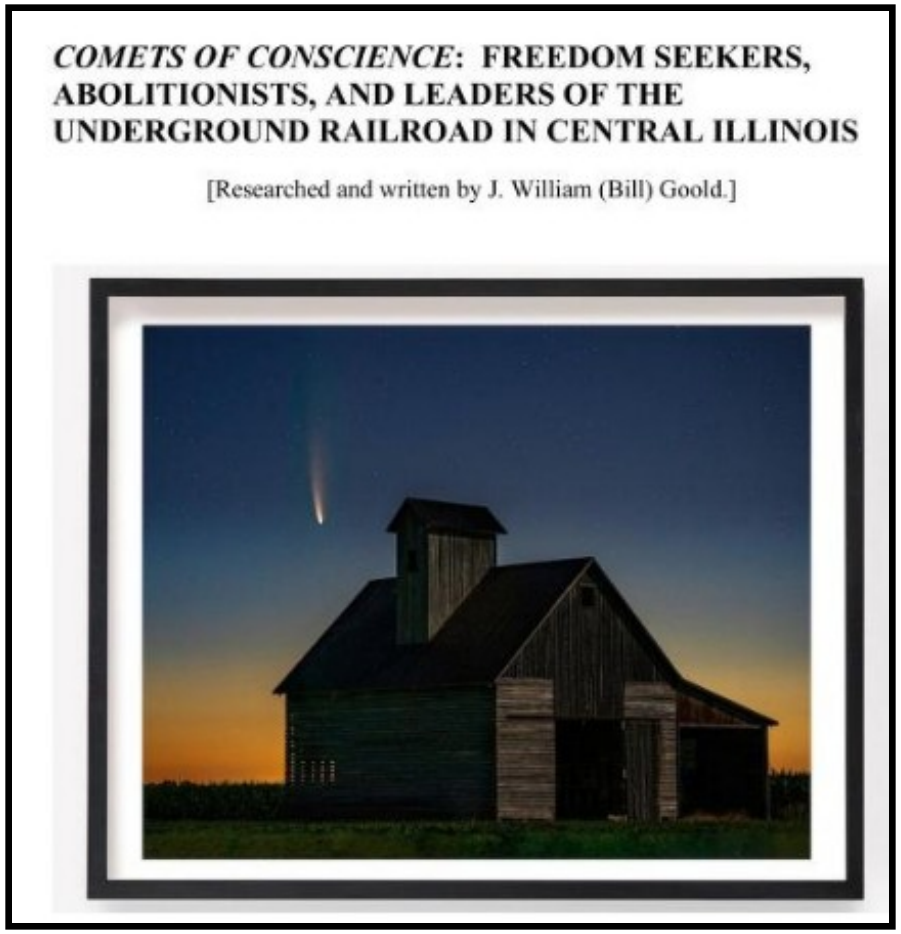
- Maybe someday Dr. Ryan's research results will be found.

- Lincoln issued a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on Sep. 22, 1862. If South did not rejoin the Union by Jan. 1, 1863, he would free all the slaves in the Rebellious States

Additional Information

- J. William (Bill) Goold, Fairbury native, recently released his unpublished manuscript about Underground Railroad in Central Illinois

- ***COMETS OF CONSCIENCE: FREEDOM SEEKERS, ABOLITIONISTS, AND LEADERS OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN CENTRAL ILLINOIS***


COMETS OF CONSCIENCE: FREEDOM SEEKERS, ABOLITIONISTS, AND LEADERS OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN CENTRAL ILLINOIS
[Researched and written by J. William (Bill) Goold.]

Additional Information

- PDF copy of Unpublished Manuscript available from Livingston County Historical Society website LivCHS.org under the Resources Tab

- https://tinyurl.com/5x9xfnd6

- Pontiac Library is making a paper copy for the History Room

- I have briefly reviewed the 246 pages in this Unpublished Manuscript after I gave this presentation 3 times
  - -Has biographies for most of the 14 Abolitionists men in Livingston County mentioned before

Underground Railroad in Livingston County

- Made YouTube video of this presentation

- Link is https://youtu.be/Vkg93FxqwaM
- Or: https://tinyurl.com/3eyz6p5u

How to contact me

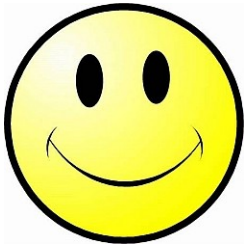
- You can reach me:

  Facebook PM message

  DaleMaley@Gmail.com

  815-692-6633 (landline with answering machine)

  I don't do Text messages (I check once a year!)



Questions?